

Gusman: a downtown jewel that's worth saving

It felt like a bath of warm honey: Luciano Pavarotti's voice, unamplified, pouring over my head in August 1987 at the Gusman Center for the Performing Arts in Miami.

And then there was Flamenco Puro's Manuela Carrasco, larger than the Winged Victory, twisting one wrist above her head like an auger.

And the "celestial choir" from Charles Ives' Fourth Symphony, raining down from one of Gusman's old-fashioned theater boxes as Michael Tilson Thomas conducted the New World Symphony.

And Yanis Pikieris, as the Prodigal Son, stumbling on his knees toward the Father in Miami City Ballet's first great Balanchine revival.

Sitting in the darkened Gusman Center, I have discovered 20th Century music, Argentine tango and Brazilian *candomble*, the satirical films of Spanish director Pedro Almodovar and the *meshuggeneh* perspective of independent New York filmmaker Henry Jaglom. I have learned what Miami is and what it can be.

But now City Manager Cesar



**LAURIE
HORN**

PLEASE SEE GUSMAN, 81

A treasure worth saving

Gusman may have to shut doors for lack of \$142,000 to run it

GUSMAN, FROM 11

Odio is asking the city commission to cut the \$142,000 subsidy the city contributes to the theater's operation. If the commission, which is expected to discuss the proposal in budget hearings Sept. 14 and 28, agrees, the Gusman may go dark.

It's outrageous: After years of effort to obtain renovation money (\$3 million in state funds now being used and \$3.9 million allocated from the upcoming bond issue for the Dade Performing Arts Center), a historic landmark may close for lack of a scant \$142,000. Already, the Department of Off-Street Parking (which runs the theater) has said it won't self-produce any shows this season — as it did last year with productions like Tony Kushner's masterful AIDS blockbuster, *Angels in America*.

Together with staff reductions and other cuts, the elimination of the half-million dollar self-presenting series will cut Gusman's operating budget from \$1.7 million to \$767,606 for fiscal 1995-96, says acting Managing Director Paul Thompson. The number of performance nights would drop from 145 last year to about 85 this season, he says.

The idea that even those dates might be eliminated is made all the more ominous by the continual pushback of the performing arts center's opening, now slated for no earlier than the year 2000.

The old Olympia

The 1926 Moorish fantasy on Flagler Street is one of a genre of "atmospheric" theaters that are being revived all over the country — usually as linchpins for urban redevelopment.

Revitalization certainly must have been in Maurice Gusman's mind in 1975 when he donated the former Olympia Theater and its accompanying office building to the city as a home for the old Miami Philharmonic. In a quirky deed restriction, Gusman required that the theater be managed by Miami's parking authority, then headed by Gusman's friend Mitchell Wolfson of the Wometco entertainment empire. Now, Gusman is dead. Wolf-

Gusman has developed a reputation as a place to feel an authentic Miami pulse.

son is dead. The old Miami Philharmonic is dead. But the quirky setup remains: The theater is run by an entity whose primary purpose is to make money stacking cars in concrete boxes.

Clark Cook, a nice man and Gusman advocate who is also executive director of the parking authority, acknowledges he is no theater impresario: His background is "33 years in the electric utilities business," Cook says.

Meanwhile, the authority — which traditionally runs in the black — is prohibited by charter from putting any profits into the theater. Any subsidy must come from the city itself.

Despite its uncertain future, three major arts institutions — the Florida Philharmonic, the New World Symphony and the Miami Film Festival — continue to present at the Gusman.

"It would be a disaster [to close the theater]," says John Graham, executive director of the Philharmonic. "It would be a sign that the things that could make Miami a vibrant community are not possible."

Closing could be 'tragic'

Other arts leaders echo his opinion: Miami City Ballet's Edward Villella calls the proposed closing "a tragic move." Gusman has an important role to play in audience outreach, he and Christopher Dunworth, president of the New World Symphony, insist.

Adds New World Symphony's Thomas: The theater is "an ideal venue for music, ballet, film — and bringing people to downtown Miami."

They're right. Artistically, at least, the 1,711-seat theater has developed a reputation as a place to feel an authentic Miami pulse. Miami City Ballet was born there in 1986 (although it had to move

out because the stage was too small). The theater has been rented extensively over the years by Miami-Dade Community College Wolfson Campus' cutting-edge multicultural performing arts programs. And *Angels in America* — the theater event of last season — sold out for nearly four days in April and turned a profit of \$45,948.

You don't have to be a genius to figure out that a municipal parking authority is not the most likely entity to come up with creative solutions for successfully running a theater.

"The job of the parking authority is to provide parking," says MDCC Wolfson Campus President Eduardo Padron, who is also board chairman of the authority. "We cannot continue to claim we are this wonderful, exciting, vibrant, cosmopolitan international community and at the same time have no theater, nothing to offer to the tourists, nothing to offer to the business people who come here."

Two-pronged answer

The solution is two-pronged.

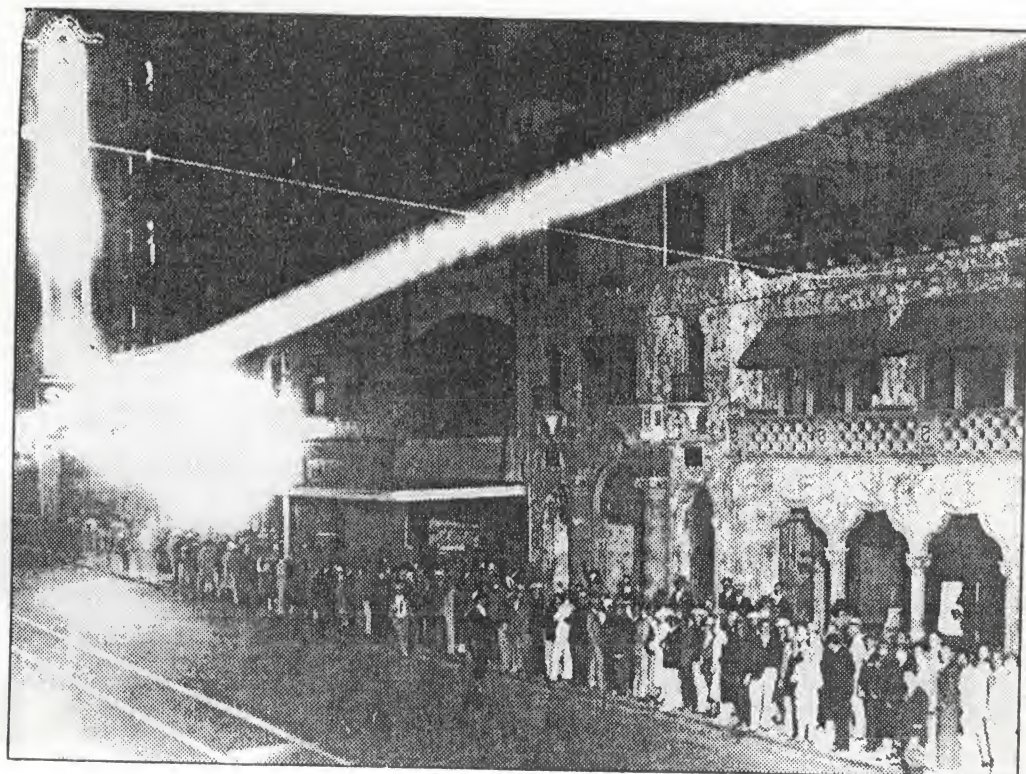
First, the Gusman must not eliminate its self-presenting series. If anything, it should expand and fine-tune it. The theater needs a schedule of lively programming designed to develop the young, ethnically diverse audience it already has. The turnout for *Angels* is a case in point. Clearly, people will spend money for events at the Gusman — if they're events people want to see.

Second, the theater desperately needs an innovative, professional management team to take over programming and the fund raising necessary to get Gusman into the black. Nothing in Maurice Gusman's original deed prevents the parking authority from doing that. In fact, Gusman was quite clear: The facility "shall be administered by the Members of the Off-street Parking Board of the City of Miami or their successors." (Italics mine.)

"There has to be a plan to use this facility in an intelligent way that will survive the present and work toward the future," says Parker Thomson, chairman of the Performing Arts Center Trust.

Where there is will, they say, there is a way. Miami just has to want it.

THE ARTS



**THE FORMER
OLYMPIA
THEATER:** A
crowd lines
Flagler Street
outside the
theater in 1926.



MOORISH FANTASY: The future of the Gusman Center is in doubt as the city of Miami considers cutting its operating subsidy to the theater.